

Awakenings... to the presence and gift of persons with disabilities in our parishes and catechetical programs

By Wendy Scherbart

Two weeks after I began my role as the Associate for Catechetical Ministry for the Diocese of San Jose in August 2004, I received a letter from Fr. William J. Stout, S.J. He inquired about how our diocese assists persons with disabilities to prepare and celebrate the sacraments. Fr. Stout served the sacramental needs of developmentally disabled persons at Agnew Developmental Center. He was the first to call my attention to the promotion of catechetical efforts that include persons with disabilities. Four months later, Diana Macalintal, the Associate for Liturgy and I were asked to meet with a mother and her children. We welcomed the mother and her children as they came through the door, one child hung behind. He was reluctant to cross the threshold of the doorway. His mother gently coached him in. He clutched three toy trains close to his chest. "These must be special trains," I said to the mother. She nodded and told us this story.

"A few weeks ago, my husband and I brought our children to mass and as usual, we went to the cry room. I encouraged my son to sit on the rug and play with his trains. Another family with children came into the room and their little girl saw the trains and ran over to play with them. My child started screaming. We tried to explain to the girl's parents that our son was unable to easily share his trains. Our child had autism. The girl's parents responded by moving her away from our son. I have begun to dread taking my child to mass. I desire a parish community where I can pray without holding my breath that something might go wrong. I desire a parish community that is welcoming, understands and accepts all of my children."

Fr. Stout's request and the mother's desire led me on a mission to provide more training and resources to parishes to serve persons of all ages with disabilities. The *National Directory for Catechesis* stated this mission clearly. "*All persons with disabilities have the capacity to proclaim the Gospel and to be living witnesses to its truth within the community of faith and offer valuable gifts. Their involvement enriches every aspect of Church life. They are not just the recipients of catechesis- they are also its agents.*"

On March 17, 2008, after consulting with nearby dioceses, the Diocese of San Jose established *Friends in Faith*, a committee to assist parish staffs in welcoming and including person with disabilities into all aspects of parish life, liturgies, catechesis, sacramental preparation, and parish programs and events. The committee's goals are to provide best practices for awareness raising, physical access and training of catechetical leaders and catechists. The committee is made of parish directors of catechetical and youth ministry, and parishioners with disabilities and their family members. The committee has shared and heard the wisdom of the group:

“I am God’s visible work.” “Each person has some ‘exceptionality’.”

“Those with special needs are affected by other’s attitudes and behavior. They respond positively to honesty and truth, to those who witness Christ, who is truth. Pity does not speak the truth.”

“If you don’t know what to do to serve those with disabilities, ask a question. We need to be open, loving and listening.”

“See those with special needs as part of who we are, respect the beauty of each person.”

“People are afraid that they will offend those with special needs, so they over compensate by talking loud, or avoiding eye contact.”

“We need to involve those with exceptionalities in ministry. We need to make it easier for them to do ministry without drawing attention to them. We need to help them be a visible presence at the parish. We need to bring them out from the shadows and allow them to be comfortable in an open and trusting community.”

“Educate through example. It is important to model patience.”

“We have tried like heck to fit in, I don’t want to be seen as just a person in a wheel chair.”

“Those with disabilities bring a gift, it might take a little longer to receive it, and so be it.”

“We need to help parents trust the Catholic Church to share the special needs of their children with us.”

“Help us to be free to be ourselves.”

“We welcome those with disabilities one person at a time.”

In the following months, look for more *Awakenings* articles about the gifts and insights of person with disabilities and how the Catholic Church of San Jose is endeavoring to open our doors of welcome to them.

Wendy Scherbart is the Director of Catechetical Ministry for the Diocese of San Jose and holds a Master of Arts in Catechetics and Education Administration from Santa Clara University.